

Looking for a Superhero: a discussion of the qualities, training and experience needed to be a university museum director

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Resumo

Os directores dos museus universitários são responsáveis por instituições complexas que envolvem o ensino, a investigação, a conservação e gestão das colecções, a educação informal, a exposição e a disseminação da informação. Em ambiente por vezes muito dinâmicos, competitivos e politicamente 'carregados', as responsabilidades e as expectativas que pesam sobre estes directores transformam-nos em verdadeiros super-heróis. Um director deve ser poderoso, inteligente, altamente competente e ter sentido de oportunidade. Para além disso, deve ser honesto, justo, comunicativo e inspirador. Para ser bem sucedido, o director deverá ainda ser capaz de incorporar uma visão a partilhar por todos, rodear-se de uma equipa de assistentes de confiança e desenvolver uma cultura de gestão potenciadora de entusiasmos, de energia e de paixão pela missão do museu. O artigo apresenta e explora o conceito de 'consciência do museu' [*museum conscience*], fundado numa tripla bússola orientadora da acção dos directores: uma bússola moral, uma bússola intelectual e uma bússola física e psicológica. Os directores ditos 'centistas' ou 'académicos' terão a ganhar em adquirir conhecimentos complementares em *fundraising*, finanças e gestão de pessoal.

Abstract

Directors of university museums are in charge of important and highly complex institutions that have a mission for research, teaching, collection, informal education, exhibition and dissemination of information. In a highly competitive, changing, and politically charged environment, the directors have so many responsibilities and expectations that they take on the role of a Superhero. In the search for a new director, museums must find a Superhero that is powerful, intelligent, highly skilled, and opportunistic. Indications are that it also is important for the director to be honest, fair, communicative and inspirational. To be successful, the director must create a shared vision, form a team of trusted assistants and develop a management culture that shares an enthusiasm, energy and passion for the museum's mission. To guide their actions, the concept is proposed that directors need a museum conscience based on a moral compass, an intellectual compass and a physical and psychological compass. Directors traditionally trained as scientists or academics will be more successful if they increase their knowledge in fundraising, finances and personnel management.

"Look! Up in the sky. It's a bird. It's a plane. It's...Superman! Yes, it's Superman-strange visitor from another planet who came to earth with powers and abilities far beyond those of mortal men. Superman - who can change the course of mighty rivers, bend steel in his bare hands [...] and leap tall buildings in a single bound."

The Adventures of Superman

Introduction

Directors of university museums are in charge of important and highly complex institutions. In a highly competitive, changing, and often politically charged environment, the directors have huge responsibilities and high-risk expectations. Furthermore, university museums present special challenges such as governance, fundraising, and

management. The directors must deal effectively with the parent administration; often a time consuming, frustrating, and delicate course. They also must be showmen, financiers, diplomats, aestheticians, philosophers and master builders. These are demanding, contradictory and exhausting roles. James Cuno (cited in TASSELL 2002: 56), Director of Harvard University Art Museums, described his efforts at fundraising as periods of

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"pressure and strain" when "every day you wake up to fight some battle, to raise some money, to push the cause uphill", a Sisyphean effort as indicated by TASSEL (2002). In addition, they must solicit cash, cultivate donors, manage the press, and deal with a curatorial staff that likely is made up of specialists with strong opinions and strong egos (AUER 2002). Today, directors are facing new challenges as museums, one of our oldest and most significant social enterprises (TIRRELL 2002), are being pressed to join the effort to remedy all ills of the world, from poverty to global warming (TASSEL 2002). Directors have so many responsibilities and expectations that they take on the role of Superheroes. Superheroes, by definition and tradition, are champions that are powerful, intelligent, highly skilled, and opportunistic. They do superhuman feats: Superman can leap tall buildings in a single bound and Wonderwoman can deflect bullets. Superheroes also have noble qualities, attributes, attitudes and arresting personas.

To be successful, do university museum directors need to have the same powers, qualities and abilities of Superheroes? What are the concerns of a search committee for a new director? What do directors and museum staff think are the best qualities, attributes, and attitudes for leadership and management in university museums? Are there guidelines and strategies that directors can follow?

In this paper, I discuss the characteristics and qualities of a superior director. The paper also provides an insight into the world of leadership at university museums from several perspectives. In addition to my observations and ideas, I report on forthright comments from museum directors and the staff, ranging from bits of wisdom to brainwaves of management theory. As a committee member, I share first hand information about the concerns of our Search Committee for a new director at the Sam Noble Oklahoma Museum of Natural History (SNOMNH), University of Oklahoma (OU). To gain the viewpoint of directors, I surveyed directors of university

and state museums and one zoo. I also surveyed the president of the Association of College and University Museums and Galleries (ACUMG), also director of a university art museum. In addition, I surveyed administrative and managerial staff and curators of the SNOMNH. I have added my perspective as Associate Director of the SNOMNH. I drew from my observations and my experience in professional organisations such as ACUMG, the International Committee for University Museums and Collections (UMAC), the Museum Assessment Program of the Institute for Museum and Library Services, and the Accreditation Program of the American Association of Museums. I also have included references to pertinent reports, studies and papers. The paper focuses on the characteristics and qualities needed by directors of university museums of natural history. However, I suggest that the characteristics and qualities are broadly appropriate for directors of university and non-university museums.

The search for a new director at the SNOMNH

The Search Committee was aware that the new director will take on a highly demanding position and role on the university campus and in the public arena. In addition to the usual tasks such as oversight of museum activities (e.g. collections) the Committee recognised that the museum needed a highly qualified new director with extensive experience. In our search, the minimum qualifications are a Ph.D. degree in the natural or social sciences (e.g. zoology) or 'the equivalent' (e.g. MBA).

The search for a new museum director can be like Waiting for Godot. Our Committee quickly realised that the search for a director is not the same as a search for a senior curator, a traditional approach. The position criteria are quite different (BOYD 1995). Vanessa Mack stated "the time has passed when an academic can manage a university museum of natural history on a part-time basis"¹, a clear

¹ V. Mack 2000. *The dual role of university museums: its influence on management*. Unpublished paper distributed at the Seminar on the Management of University Museums, organized by The Finnish Cultural Centre and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development/Institutional Management in Higher Education Programme. September 18-19, Paris, France.

reference to the fact that many university museum directors attempt to split their time between their research activities and their administrative duties. Her pronouncement is a mate to the statement that "directing a natural history museum requires more than common sense and a Ph.D. in palaeontology or ornithology" (KRISHTALKA & HUMPHREY 1998: 35). Above all else, the museum is seeking an administrator in the broadest sense of the term. Candidates from the curatorial or scientific ranks often have skills and a research mentality that are not likely to serve them in their directorial responsibilities. For example, they may lack the political savvy necessary to deal with high profile stakeholders. Nevertheless, there is a great deal to be said for having experience with the product. It is no simple matter for someone lacking a university museum background to understand the importance of collections, the diversity of a museum's outreach program, or how these activities translate into educational exhibits that can be appreciated by the public (MARES & TIRRELL 1998). For example, Lawrence Small, the Secretary (director de facto) at the Smithsonian Institution (SI), a banker by profession, has provoked a civil war within his institution (for example, directors of six SI museums submitted their resignations). Apparently, his goals are modernisation and money (NEUMAN 2002). Our Committee realised that candidates from outside the field needed to have experience relevant to the museum field, a demonstrated record of effective leadership, the ability to adapt to the culture and conditions of the particular museum, and the vigour and flexibility needed for a new and different leadership challenge. Good administration is much the same in any organization (e.g. communication), but effectiveness in a museum demands an understanding of what a museum is and how its mission is to be accomplished or 'sensitivity' to the museum environment (BOYD 1995).

Our Committee also identified the museum's relationship with the university top administrators as an area of special concern. This relationship largely depends on the director's ability to develop close working and harmonious personal relationships and keep the museum in a position of security, integrity,

and favour (RABB 2001). This is important because the director usually reports to a dean, provost or president who serves as the museum's sole administrative parent and daily governor. Rarely does the director of a university museum have direct contact with the university's governing authority (e.g. trustees) and rarely is the authority aware of the museum in any detail. In our case, the director will need to strike a harmonious and resonant cord with the university president who has taken a special interest in the museum and to the provost to whom he or she reports.

The director's ability to raise funds also was a major concern of the Committee. Although the museum has a new facility with an increased staff and budget, the museum is no longer high on the university's list of funding priorities and the museum does not receive any funds directly from the state. The museum competes with several other major museums in the state. Private giving and grants are down in the aftermath of the September 11th terrorist attacks and because of the general state of the US economy.

Results and Discussion of Field Survey

In September and October 2002, I contacted 26 individuals and received 22 responses. I received 11 from directors, including four from directors at university museums of natural history, three from directors at university museums of art, and one each from the director at a university museum of anthropology, a state museum of natural history, a state museum of history, and a county zoo. I also received 11 responses from personnel at the SNOMNH. Survey comments were collected via email and stored digitally. I sorted and grouped the responses by focus areas for discussion. All individuals were familiar with the SNOMNH and knew about the search for a new director. I gave them the statement "Directors of university museums are in charge of important and highly complex institutions that have a mission for research, teaching, collection, informal education,

exhibition and dissemination of information". I then asked them to provide brief and concise answers to the following questions: i) What qualities are most important for a new director? ii) What experience or training is most important? iii) What are the three most important concerns for the new director? iv) How can the new director lead the museum? v) How can the new director manage the museum?

What qualities are most important for a new director?

"A director needs a moral compass, an intellectual compass, and a physical and psychological compass".
Georgianna Contiguglia
CEO, Colorado Historical Society

The survey responses from most directors tended to focus on acquired skills such as improving their ability to communicate. As indicated by Michael Mares, former director of the SNOMNH, "The director needs the ability to converse with many different people on all manner of subjects". Additional attributes include optimism, vision, tenacity, and sense of humour, and the ability to get along with people and to work very long hours. In addition, they need to develop a thick skin (SCHWARZER 2002). Another director in the survey expressed that it was important to understand 'community' as a concept and have a joy of interacting on an intellectual and social level with your internal (campus) and external communities. A strong sense of advocacy also was mentioned, tied to the belief in the power of the museum as a social force in society.

The staff of the SNOMNH also focused on humanitarian characteristics in their survey responses. They want a director who has integrity, vision, courage and excellent moral character. In addition, they want a leader with strong interpersonal skills who is a creative, confident, team player; a person who is open-minded, with real interest in working collaboratively with other professionals and ability to bring people together to further the mission of the museum. The inspirational quality of the leader also is important, as indicated by a SNOMNH staff member "A good

director should be able to encourage staff to do more than they think they can do". As RABB (2001) indicated, effective leadership extends to a truly caring disposition, to a passion for the world: "We need to look for people who can light a fire in others, and find the means to encourage and develop those with this passion". KOUZES & POSNER (1993) found similar qualities and characteristics that followers should expect from leaders. The five leadership characteristics mentioned most often by middle managers were honesty, forward-looking, inspiring, competent, and fair-minded. One respondent interviewed by SEVIER (2002) in a survey of university personnel stated that honesty is not a core value, it is 'the' core value: if you cannot trust your leader, then all the other skills and attributes simply do not matter that much. As indicated by BOYD (1995) and DRUCKER (1966), an effective director has the ability to get the right things done. To identify the right things, the director must have i) comprehension – to understand the basic mission of the museum and the greater context within which it functions; ii) acculturation – to understand the museum's internal and external culture; iii) analysis – to identify, evaluate, sort, and rank the right things to be done; iv) vision – to see the future, both as a straight line projection of doing the same things better and a more radical vision to deal with changing circumstances; and v) judgment – to give thoughtful deliberation and consultation.

Directors may need quality compasses to guide them, a plan proposed in the survey by Georgianna Contiguglia, CEO of the Colorado Historical Society. She suggests that the director will need three types of compasses: i) a moral compass guided by faith, integrity, humility, compassion and optimism; ii) an intellectual compass that has the ability to figure out what is important, to set and communicate goals, to think long term and plan for the future, to understand the business of the institution, and to ask appropriate questions; and iii) a physical and psychological compass that has the ability to relax and have a life outside of work, to listen to criticism and learn from it, and to maintain a sense of humour, good health, and plenty of energy.

Taking it a step further, Contiguglia's three cardinal points can be encompassed in what I have called a 'museum conscience' or the willingness to always consider the museum's interests above your own. Directors need to do what is best for the museum, putting aside their personal interests, and working to instill similar thinking in their followers. In addition, there has been increasing recognition that successful leaders have soft-side management or emotional intelligence as described by human resource scholars such as GOLEMAN (1995) and CHERNISS (2000). Much like a moral compass or an institutional conscience, emotional intelligence refers to non-cognitive skills. Research indicates that high emotional intelligence is characteristic of better managers and leaders and that most people can improve their skills with coaching and practice. Research also suggests that leaders who are able to establish that mutual trust and respect and a certain warmth and rapport with members of their group will be more effective (FLEISHMAN & HARRIS 1962).

What experience or training is most important?

"Mix 2 parts management and personnel, 1 part resourcefulness, 1 part research experience, shake well. Serve chilled!"

Patrick Fisher
Coordinator, Department of Computing Systems
SNOMNH

The staff and the directors in the survey had several criteria in common regarding the best experience and training for the director of a university museum such as the SNOMNH. A Ph.D. in the sciences is most important. The Ph.D. gives a credibility factor for the museum director with the rest of the faculty. As expressed by R. Bruce McMillan, director of the Illinois State Museum: "I retain the belief that a Director in a university or state museum needs to be grounded in a discipline and possess the requisite content knowledge to earn the necessary respect from the staff. However, one director's opinion is that the Ph.D. is excellent for a museum with a curatorial and research focus but the best training is working up through the ranks of a museum in various capacities with increasing responsibility for

supervision and management. In their Report, the Smithsonian Institution's Science Commission (SABLOFF *et al.* 2002) recommended that only a scientist with an international reputation could provide the credibility at the top leadership positions. In addition, it is essential that directors have a good understanding of academic culture. However, the Ph.D. may not be so important for numerous smaller university museums. If the director is expected to contribute to the academic research of one of the fields of the museum, then he or she will need an earned Ph.D. in that field and may need a history of research and publication before coming to the job. If the director is expected to raise money and influence donors and politicians, then a background in PR or politics, or corporate CEO/CFO might be more appropriate.

Directors and staff also shared the need for the director to have experience dealing with a bureaucracy such as a university or government office at some level and experience in working in complex organizations, preferably in a top-level management position that required fundraising. The director of a natural history museum indicated the importance of experience with research scientists and with educators: "These two groups have very different motivations, languages and cultures. A director has to understand and respect these two distinct and essential staff segments".

What are the three most important concerns?

"Funding, funding, and funding."
a curator at the SNOMNH.

The three most important concerns for all the respondents could be listed as fundraising, fundraising, and more fundraising. Fundraising is described as a critical concern in every survey response. There is no doubt that directors and staff recognize fundraising and development as critical to the future of the SNOMNH and other university museums. As indicated by Truett Latimer (*pers. comm.* 1997), former director of the Houston Museum of Natural Science, "An institution should not become so rich that it is not out in the community trying to

gain support (funding) for its programmes". Directors will need to be effective and efficient in managing resources, particularly staff and budgets.

Directors surveyed also discussed the need for positioning their museums to successfully compete in a changing social and economic environment. To accomplish this, several directors indicated that it is important to improve the connection between the museum and its community and improving relevance, especially the role of the museum as an advocate for overarching social and environmental issues. They also have to be cognizant of the university's educational goals and seek out collaborations and partnerships that enhance the goals of the university and the museum.

How can the new director lead the museum?

A great vision can serve a useful purpose even if it is understood by just a few key people. But the real power of a vision is unleashed only when most of those involved in an enterprise or activity have a common understanding of its goals and direction.

John P. Kotter (1996) in *Leading Change*

Unfortunately, many of the respondents in my survey confuse leadership with management. In my opinion, leadership is concerned with the question 'Where are we going?' while management is concerned with the question 'How do we get there?'. Thus, leadership is direction and management is action. For example, both directors and staff emphasised that the director should lead by example. The problem with this idea is that it implies action, not direction. The director may set a fine example in areas such as work habits, professionalism and productivity, but these activities do not cumulatively form a comprehensive direction.

Staff members indicated that through its leadership the institution must have a vehicle for renewable, clearly defined goals. The staff must work as a unit, not as fragmented camps. Staff members also stated that all employees should have input to development of the departmental goals and understand how they can help achieve the museum's goals.

Directors and staff in the survey agree that directors should learn about the museum's history before making sweeping changes. A director must determine what is most appropriate for the institution, keep the planning that fits, change the plans that do not and do so with a firm commitment and solid reasoning. The director also must build a strong internally accepted vision and a visible and engaged external presence. An additional suggestion is that in order to lead, the director must gain a comfort level with ambiguity. The director needs to know where he or she wants to take the institution and then be willing and able to guide the institution through a constantly changing environment to reach that goal. Directors will need to be flexible in their leadership style. As indicated by the director of a natural history museum, "the director who wants to take the museum in a straight line from point A to point Z by will be frustrated and unsuccessful".

To be good leaders, directors also must make the directorship a priority and put the museum goals ahead of their personal goals and pet projects. It is important that directors take their position seriously. In my experience, they must be careful to avoid perpetuating the divisions, real or perceived, which often create camps or covens in university museums. For example, I have heard the remark, "I'm not stepping down as director, I am being promoted to curator – now I can spend a good deal of my time whining, complaining, and making the director's life miserable". Apparently, this was said in jest. However, it was discouraging to the morale of the staff.

As SEVIER (2002) indicated, leaders also must support their followers. There are four leadership failures that seem to undermine the spirit of followers: leaders who have no sense of vision, leaders who refuse to listen, leaders who cannot make a decision, and leaders who have betrayed a trust or were dishonest. Directors expect special qualities and characteristics from their staff. Many of these are the same as the qualities that staff expects of their directors (e.g. honesty). With loyalty, the director can move the staff in mutually desirable directions, and the more flexibility the

director has when things go wrong or face challenges in the relationship. The term 'peopleships' has been used to describe the relationship between leaders and followers. "The success of the leader and the followers is derived from similar qualities [...] relationships, partnerships and a deep appreciation for people are the keys. Otherwise, each [...] [is] merely acting alone" (SEVIER 2002: 3).

The essence of leadership has been summarized by R. Bruce McMillan in his survey response: "Establishing a set of shared values among the museum family is important prerequisite for establishing leadership in a museum. Productive strategic planning will position the museum to build on its strengths and capture opportunities that will take the Museum in a planned direction...working collectively will ensure that the museum meets its goals and establishes a sense of institutional vitality. The successful orchestration of this process by the director is the essence of leadership".

How can the new director manage the museum?

"I hate the word manage - I conduct! Sometimes the symphony strikes a sour note but overall, it's a great analogy."

Lisa Tremper Hanover
Director, Berman Museum of Art, Ursinus College
President, ACUMG

Hanover's analogy to conducting her museum as a symphony orchestra is highly appropriate. Orchestration of a symphony and a museum requires great communication for the best performance. Efficient communication among staff and between staff and leadership is vital in decentralised and functional structures such as museums². Above all else, the surveys of directors and staff agreed that communication is the most important part of management. As stated by a SNOMNH staff member "I would appreciate it if they (directors) would frequently take time to meet individually with and understand the concerns of all the staff". Another

responded with the desire for the director to "provide forums for interaction between top administration and lower echelons". In my experience, one of the most disappointing comments I have heard a director utter was "I don't want people meeting, I want them doing something!" This is a clear misunderstanding of what management is and how it can be achieved. Museum directors, like conductors, also must possess a thorough understanding of the players in their organisations to successfully orchestrate the diversity of talents. Directors must not only know about their staff, but learn the dynamics of their relationships: find out how they do their work and how the work gets done.

It is important for directors to become better students of non-profit management theory and practice and pay greater attention to governance and evaluation and assessment of programme and staff. They need to learn skills such as informed decision-making, and team building. Directors will benefit from training in financial management, board relations, and personnel (SCHWARZER 2002). Stephen A. Greyser, Chapman professor of business administration emeritus, is part of Harvard's Program for Art Museum Directors. He states: "I show one slide in the program that's entitled, 'What They Didn't Teach in My Ph.D. Program in Art History'. Most heads of museums have never had training in such things as financial management. They've had no formal training in strategic planning, in institutional relationships with stakeholders, in crisis management — the kinds of issues that all heads of organizations must face" (cited in TASSELL 2002: 56).

One of the most insightful comments from the survey is from Georgianna Contiguglia. She compares the museum to a family: "Creating an environment for success in your museum is almost as challenging as creating an environment for success in your family. In both instances you must help those around you understand what is important, guide them in their thinking, keep them out of trouble, and give them

² A. DAUSCHEK 2000. Continuous change as leitmotif in current museum management. Unpublished ms.

the tools and confidence to nurture their imagination and to realise their dreams. Teaching them that nothing comes without hard work will also help!"

Two qualities important for management of staff are respect and integrity by treating all persons and issues uniformly and without bias, as expressed in the survey by the director of a state natural history museum. Different individuals have different management styles, but one of the most important qualities of the director is predictability. Employees want to know what is expected and know what to expect. Dependable and consistent personnel management is a must and the staff must be brought into the fold, otherwise: "[...] organizations will seldom thrive with great numbers of followers that are alienated, reluctant-resistive, or active-passive (...) for organizations to flourish, they need exceptional followers" (SEVIER 2002: 3).

The director must act decisively and rapidly by enforcing policies to prevent long-term problems of personnel management. In addition, effective management requires careful allocation of responsibility and strong backing of supervisors and middle managers. Mixed messages about authority and chain-of-command cause confusion and result in chaos that cannot be controlled by mid-level managers. In the Smithsonian Institution Report, the Commissioners stated that directors must have the fortitude and determination to hold scientists (e.g. curators) accountable for performance given the relative freedom that they enjoy, the support that they receive, and the diverse resources (e.g. collections) available to them (SABLOFF *et al.* 2002).

Managing multiple tasks, commonplace at university museums, can be difficult if the directors come from academia. As the result of their training, most scientists can focus on one or two projects. However, multitasking requires attention to many projects, usually operating with many different variables. In his survey response, Scott Lanyon, director of the Bell Museum of Natural History, University of Minnesota, indicated that multitasking is like the balancing act of keeping plates spinning on the tops of poles: "As director, my job is [...] to identify what plates you want

to have spinning within your institution, and to spend the minimal amount of energy possible on each plate to keep it going. If you spend too much time on any one plate the others will come crashing down. This is one of the hardest lessons I have had to learn". A staff member also cautioned that: "Multiple foci are okay, but part of our success lies in avoiding overburdening the staff with too much multi-tasking".

The staff also wants to be trusted and suggested this can be done by establishing a competent and qualified group of middle managers, giving them the authority to accomplish the assigned tasks, and then letting them meet their goals and objectives. As stated by one survey respondent, "I would want them [directors] to be fully informed about all aspects of the museum. Then let each department manage their area as they think best". This view is shared by the director of a natural history museum who suggested "[...] the downward dispersal of authority where each staff member is given as much responsibility and autonomy as possible". However, staff also expressed the need for establishing checks and balances to manage the museum in areas such as finances.

Conclusion

If you want 1 year of prosperity, grow grain
If you want 10 years of prosperity, grow trees
If you want 100 years of prosperity, grow people
Chinese proverb (Sevier 2002a)

Perhaps another line should be added to the Chinese proverb: *If you want museum directors, grow Superheroes*. As discussed in this paper, it takes superior characteristics and qualities to direct a university museum of natural history. However, the characteristics and qualities also are broadly appropriate for directors of university museums of art and anthropology, state museums of natural history and history, and zoos. Like Superman or Wonderwoman, the directors will need to respond to every challenge and recover from every battle. Unlike the aforementioned superheroes, the directors, will not need to leap tall buildings or deflect bullets. They do not need to be strange visitors from

another planet. In fact, they must have the best *human* characteristics and qualities as indicated by my observations, discussion with a Search Committee, and from results of a survey of directors and staff of the SNOMNH. The survey also indicated that directors should be visionary, communicative, honest, powerful, intelligent, highly skilled, and opportunistic. They also must be driven to do what is best for the museum and put aside their egos. The directors also must have unswerving dedication and perseverance and be highly resilient to changes in the environment. The Search Committee and

survey respondents also strongly indicated that a Ph.D. in a museum discipline was the most important training for the director. All agreed that fundraising is the top priority. However, to be successful, the directors must increase their knowledge in areas such as fundraising, personnel management, and finances. Every director must incorporate strategic planning. The concept of a *museum conscience* is introduced, whereby directors will need to develop moral, intellectual and psychological/physical compasses for guidance, for decision-making, and for their well-being.

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